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Engendering the Klondike Gold Rush

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Skagway, Alaska, was established to commemorate and interpret the 1897-1898 gold rush to the Klondike River in Yukon Territory, Canada—the last of the gold rushes participated in by single prospectors (mostly men) using the simple tools of gold pan and one-man rockers. Set in the frigid north at a time of economic downturn, the rush captured the imagination of a nation. From it came images that stay with the popular culture today, everything from Jack London's *Call of the Wild* to Klondike© ice cream bars.

Using artifact data from five excavations in Skagway, combined with information from 31 other historical archeological sites from mining throughout the North American West, I constructed statistical "profiles" of six types of archeological assemblages. These typical assemblages helped solve some specific problems related to **who** was throwing trash into a gold-rush era trash dump. They also yielded some interesting observations about the differences between assemblages that originated in households or businesses in which there were women and those that were generated by men.

I divided the 36 artifact collections into six groups or "assemblages": Transient Males, Families, Saloons, Brothels, Hotels and Restaurants, and Military. These groups were typical of the types of households and businesses that could have been using our dump in Skagway. Using 14 categories of artifacts not associated with building construction, repair, or demolition, I constructed typical statistical profiles for these groups. In so doing, I discovered that there were real, reliable, and statistically-significant differences between the artifact assemblages of households that contained only men and those that also included women; and between saloons, that were patronized only by men, and brothels, that had a considerable female influence on the generation of archeological assemblages.

The most obvious groups to compare were the Family and the Transient Male assemblages. Most of the differences are easy to understand and interpret (see the accompanying table for the numbers). The Family Assemblage had higher frequencies of food storage items, decorated dishes, undecorated dishes, other household items, pharmaceuticals, and female-specific items (including jewelry, cosmetic bottles, and items of women's clothing). The Transient Male assemblage had statistically higher frequencies of Male-Specific items, including suspender buckles, cuff links, collar stays, shaving creme jars, and items of men's clothing; tobacco-related items; armaments; and other artifacts, especially those specific to certain occupations.

Of some surprise was the relatively high frequency of liquor-related items in the Family Assemblage. In contrast, and just as unexpectedly to those of us who were raised on the westerns of Hollywood, a very small proportion of the assemblage from transient male households contained liquor bottles. What could account for this unexpected juxtaposition?

When examined in the context of turn-of-the-century morality, gender roles, and the boom town phenomenon, the explanation for the low frequency in the transient male households is almost self-evident. The successful miner was gregarious, depending heavily on the whiskey-lubricated tongues of his comrades to inform him of the richest areas to prospect. He needed a willing service sector of restaurants, saloons, and brothels to provide him with the comforts of home. Because he expected to be coming into great riches sometime soon, the expense of eating and drinking away from "home" did not particularly bother him. A bachelor's cabin or room was simply a place to sleep. Therefore, artifacts associated with a man's residence did not contain items associated with cooking, eating, or drinking.

In this context, it is also possible to understand the much higher frequency of liquor-related items in the family home. Despite the social sanction against "respectable" women drinking alcohol, the archeological evidence suggests that they probably imbibed within the privacy of their own homes, either directly through the use of wine and other spirits, or indirectly through the use of medicinals, which often had a higher alcohol content than distilled liquors. The mister probably drank more often at home than in the saloons once the missus came to town.

Two other artifact assemblages that, when contrasted, provide evidence of the gender-related differential use of material culture are the Brothel

and Saloon Assemblages. On the western mining frontier, the saloon and the brothel met very similar needs: they were "the poor man's club," functioning to provide a social sphere for men far from friends and family. Most western saloons provided some sort of sexual entertainment, and most brothels provided liquor for sale to their customers. If one is to believe the reminiscences of miners and prostitutes, the alcohol and conversation were indeed more important than sexual commerce in both institutions.

However, there are some very important differences between the brothel and saloon artifact collections. By 1900 in Alaska, and in much of the rest of the North American West, women were forbidden from entering saloons. Those who defied the law were assumed to be prostitutes and treated accordingly (usually by being able to conduct their business rather than by being arrested). Women in saloons, by the nature of their illicit status, had little choice in the purchase or use of material culture. The brothels, on the other hand, were almost entirely owned, operated, and occupied by women. While men were the customers in both establishments, women dominated the selection of material culture only in the brothels.

Not surprisingly, the incidence of liquor-related items and bottle closures is very similar in the two assemblages: the provision of alcohol was very important in both establishments. The differences, however, are much more interesting than the similarities.

The most obvious link to gender is in the frequency of female-specific items, which are more than 40 times higher in the brothel assemblage than in the saloon assemblage. In addition, there are greater frequencies of food storage containers and pharmaceutical bottles in the brothels, probably because the prostitutes were living at their place of business (prostitutes employed in saloons generally lived elsewhere).

Surprisingly, the saloons exhibited higher frequencies of decorated dishes than in the brothels, and the brothels a higher frequency of undecorated dishes, exactly the opposite of what I expected. While 19th-century saloons usually served meals to their customers, food service in brothels was more likely to be reserved to the employees. The unlikely juxtaposition of decorated and undecorated dishes can only be explained in the context of the institution of prostitution. In particular, prostitutes were often transient women working a circuit, women whose possessions were limited to personal items. The madam supplied the food service in an institutional setting and was apparently reluctant to provide fancy, and presumably more expensive, dishes for her employees (at least in the case of the working-class brothels that provided the data for this study).

Other interesting contrasts and comparisons can be made, but through this study, the archeological record independently demonstrated what historians of the mining west already knew, at least intuitively. The appearance of women on the mining frontier tended to correlate with greater social and residential stability, and hence a larger, and more varied material culture. Services earlier provided by the saloon keepers and madams, such as providing food, drink, and companionship, were taken home when families and wives came to town. Women used alcohol, but only at home or in the form of medicinals, many of which were prepared specifically with her in mind. And, not surprisingly, the presence or absence of women in the archeological manifestation of a household or business is best predicted by the presence or absence of items used primarily by women (it is amazing how many archeologists fail to describe their buttons, or note whether a shoe was a man's or woman's!).

Table: Relative Frequencies of the Artifact Categories in Each of the Assemblages

Type	Family	Male	Saloon	Brothel
Food Storage Items	20%	3%	4%	7%
Decorated Dishes	8%	1%	2%	1%
Undecorated Dishes	8%	2%	7%	14%
Lighting Devises	2%	2%	2%	2%
Other Household Items	7%	4%	10%	2%
Phamaceuticals	6%	2%	2%	6%
Liquor-Related Items	18%	5%	36%	21%
Bottle Closures	4%	1%	25%	25%
Generic Personal Items	10%	43%	5%	9%
Female-Specific Items	4%	0%	<1%	8%
Male-Specific Items	3%	6%	<1%	<1%
Tobacco-Related Items	<1%	10%	2%	1%
Amaments/Military	3%	10%	1%	2%
Other Artifacts	6%	11%	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

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